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ABSTRACT

From Virginia Woolf's time on, scholars have been looking for the invisible woman who was silenced during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance not only as a matter of custom but often as a matter of law. To find her, scholars must look not only at the prominent women of these periods, such as Margery Kempe and Queen Elizabeth I, but also at the letters of Margaret Paston, the diaries of Anne Askew, and the writings of Margaret More Roper. One genre rarely tapped but offering a rich display of the female voice in the Renaissance is the advice manual. As men increasingly moved into a secular space leaving the religious and moral realm to women, this genre became available to mothers. Addressed to children when the writer believed her death to be imminent, these manuals reveal a distinctly female discourse, in which the female "whisper" replaces the male firm command and the female "let" replaces the male imperative "shall." Through these books, scholars are fortunate to discern not just the contemporary religious and social ideals on which women built their lives and their beliefs, but the actual voices of women speaking to their children. Scholars are able to come into contact with the mind of women who are well read and careful observers, women who can mix experience with style and leave literary legacies which have gone through several editions during the 16th and 17th centuries. (Contains 15 references.) (TB)

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Judith Gero John

Commands and Whispers:

Maternal Voices in Early Advice Books for Children

In 1929, in A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf emphasizes the difficulty of discovering writings by women, particularly middle-class women. Searching Professor Trevelyan's History of England, she reports her findings concerning the history of women in England:

> Occasionally an individual woman is mentioned, an Elizabeth, or a Mary; a queen or a great lady. But by no possible means could middle-class women with nothing but brains and character at their command have taken part in any one of the great movements which, brought together, constitute the historian's view of the past. (77)

Woolf's observation underscores the most immediate problem for women in literary studies: invisibility. It was during the Renaissance, according to Ruth Kelso in Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (1956), that women were pushed into the background by gender doctrines. Kelso also conjectures that women may have been on the receiving end of a cultural guilt complex: as men turned more and more to secular, civic ambitions, the residual Christian virtues of humility and retirement were displaced onto women (23-6). In 1977, Joan Kelly agrees with Woolf and Kelso in her seminal article: "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" Kelly insists that while the Renaissance opened Italian society to the "social and cultural expression for which the age was known," the same "developments affected women adversely, so much so that there was no Renaissance for women--at

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least not during the Renaissance" (19).[1] While current scholarship tries to redefine both the concept of invisibility and the Renaissance itself in gender terms (i.e. Did women subvert the social order?), the fact remains that women during this period were certainly forced into secondary roles by law.

Originally, as Woolf discovered, writings by women of any time were overlooked because of the patriarchal structure of our own society. Even now, forays into writings by women which do not fit into recognized masculine literary patterns--i.e. diaries, journals, and letters--are made cautiously and in addition to more typical literary studies. When Gilbert and Gubar issued The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women (1985) they hesitated to include early examples of writings by women which did not fall into traditional categories. Covering the literature by women during both the middle ages and Renaissance in one brief chapter (less than 22 pages of text), Gilbert and Gubar chose some of the most prominent women of the periods (Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Queen Elizabeth I, Amelia Lanier, and Mary Sidney Herbert). Sadly absent are the letters of Margaret Paston, the diaries of Anne Askew, and even the writings of Margaret More Roper. From Woolf's time until the present, however, scholars have been looking for the invisible woman who were writing during a time when being seen and not heard was for women not a matter of decorum but a matter, frequently, of law.[2]

Elaine Beilin in Redeeming Eve (1987) attempts to recover

some of the women from Renaissance oblivion, and she discusses a few middle-class mothers who, on their death-beds, write books of advice for their children. Although these books are highly moral and didactic (as are many of the canonical books of this period) the reason they have remained in obscurity for so long is that they are written in the whispers of mothers rather than in the commanding voices of fathers.

Father's advice books of this period help to support what Kelso has already discovered. There is certainly a movement in them away from the moral towards the secular, and always there resounds the commanding voice of the patriarchy. Lord Burghley, William Cecil, wrote advice pamphlets for both of his sons and the advice contained in them freezes in time the social changes to which Kelso refers. In 1561, Burghley wrote "A Memorial for Thomas Cecil" as his son prepared to tour Europe with his tutor. The "Memorial" is primarily a letter reminding his son of his duty to God's commandments and includes an order that Thomas keep a journal of the day's activities. Young Thomas' day was to begin in prayer:

> And after this private prayer every morning, whereunto you must bind yourself and for no matter of business leave it undone, you shall make you ready in your apparel in cleanly sort, doing that for civility and health and not for pride. This done, then shall you at your appointed hour resort to such common prayer as shall be accorded to be said by you and your company, and my meaning is that you shall use the manner of the prayer of the Church of England in Latin. (4) [emphasis added]

To his second son, Robert, Cecil also wrote an advice pamphlet

entitled "Certain Precepts for the Well Ordering of a Man's Life." This pamphlet includes more secular advice than spiritual; commands which are distinctly similar to the advice given by Polonius to his son Laertes in Shakespeare's Hamlet. The booklet cautions Robert Cecil to be careful in matters of choosing his wife, his allies, and a residence. Cecil warns his son to avoid debt, especially for another, and not to trust any man with his estate or his credit. Although the advice is not unusual, the difference in a single father's advice over a period of 20 years remarkably underscores the movement of fathers from moral to secular advice. Similarly, James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) devoted 23 pages to religious matters and 133 pages to legal and secular matters in the Basilicon Doran, a book of advice written to his infant son in 1598 because an illness caused James to fear his own death.

It is--as Kelso and Kelly would argue--this movement within society for men to become more secular and public and women to take up the private and religious role which is primarily the reason few women for the public during this period. Paradoxically, however, the acceptance of these virtues gave women an opportunity to express themselves in a way which would have normally been denied to them. In taking up the role as religious educators of children, some mothers felt an intense need to write out all of the moral instruction they felt their children needed. The books which grew out of this emphasis on a mother's duty are certainly didactic and moral, but they allow

the modern reader the opportunity to look into a middle-class, Renaissance woman's mind and education.

Elizabeth Grymeston, generally acknowledged as the author of the first advice book of this period by a woman, Miscelanea, Meditations, Memoratives (1604), was well read and knew Latin and some Greek. Immediately obvious in her book is that her first words are not commands--as seen in the ordering of a Lord Burghley or a James VI--but rather whispers. While "must" and "shall" dominate Burghley's writing, "let" is Grymeston's most commanding word. Burghley writes:

> First, you shall remember before all things the commandment of the Lord your God, the Father of all, saying Hear Israel, the Lord thy God is one God, and love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment.
>
> Now for the keeping of this commandment you must daily, yea continually, ask it of God in thought and word using this many of speech: Give to me what yo u wish and prescribe for me what you will."

Grymeston reflects Burghley's sentiment in a vastly different voice:

> When thou risest, let thy thoughts ascend, that grace may descend...Remember that prayer is the wing wherewith thy soule flieth to heauen; and meditation the eye wherewith we see God...Let thy sacrifice be an innocent heart; offer it dayly at set houres [A3].

Throughout the book, Grymeston never demands nor commands the child. She whispers her advice from her mother's heart.

> My dearest sonne, there is nothing so strong as the force of love; there is no love so forcible as the love of an affectionate mother to hir naturall childe: there is no[way a] mother can either more affectionately show her nature, or more naturally manifest hir affection, than in advising hir children out of hir owne experience, to eshue evill, and encline them to do that which is good [B2].

Not only does she speak in whispers, she also apologizes for writing. This creates part of the paradox of reading these writings. Grymeston and the handful of mothers during the 17th century who followed her example state explicitly that they accept their cultures values. They apparently believed in the doctrine of the silent woman, the private woman, and this belief is reflected in their writings.

> Out of these resolutions, finding the libertie of the age to be such, as that quicquid libet licet [any man may do as one pleases], so men keep themselves from criminall offences; and my mothers undeserved wrath so virulent, as that I(have neither power to resist it, nor patience to endure it, but must yeeld to this languishing consumption to which it has brought me:[A3]

Although literary apologies became a literary convention for many Renaissance courtiers who attempted to appear humble to flatter their would be patrons, Grymeston wrote to her son Bernye for the same reason many fathers, Mathew Rogers, Sir Walter Raleigh, and King James, wrote to their children--the fear that death was close at hand and that her death would leave her child without the proper moral guidance.[3] Rogers and Raleigh did die, and although King James did not, he was very ill at the time he began his book, and among his reasons for writing to his son, he states "And because the houre of death is uncertaine to me (as unto all flesh) I leave it as my Tesatament"[A4v-B1].

Grymeston fears not only her own death, but also the death of her husband. She uses death to empower her--to gain permission to write when she otherwise might not.

> I resolved to breake the barren soule of my fruitless braine, to dictate something for thy direction; the

> rather for that as I am now a dead woman among the living, so stand I doubtfull of thy fathers life; which albeit God hath preserved from eight severall sinister assaults, by which it hath been sought"[A3].

The very act of dying gave Grymeston, and at least two of the women who followed her, the ability to overcome the strictures of society and publish their advice books for their children; for, if they did not write, their deaths would result in their failure to guide the Christian lives of their children.

The kind of advice offered in these books is nothing unusual to Renaissance society. Grymeston's list of subjects include instructions on the levelling of one's life, the mortification of melancholie, the ties between fearing death and living an evil life, and need of the true Christians to bear their crosses willingly. She insists Bernye look into the sinners glass and see the "reflecyion of evil and how evil afflicts one's life," but when she does, she uses the ideas and words of the Catholic church.

Once death gave to these mothers the permission to dare to go beyond the social code of the time, for as themselves they seldom speak above a whisper, they needed to discover a way to give force to their voices. Tilde Sankovitch in "Inventing Authority of Origin: The Difficult Enterprise" claims that Renaissance men, by citing poets from classical Greek and Latin literature, were holding up their authority to write--their divine right to follow in the footsteps of others. Women had few female precursors to point to, and so Grymeston whispered her love through the commanding voices of the bible, the Catholic

canonical prayers and the patriarchal poets of England.

Beilin traces some of Grymeston's quotations to England's Parnassus, a dictionary of poetic quotations which was published in about 1600, three years before Grymeston's death, but points out that Grymeston reveals "a strong mind, one that cleverly resolves the women writer's chronic dilemma, how to possess 'masculine' knowledge and use 'masculine' language without sacrificing feminine virtue" (267). In an effort to create a mother's advice book with a father's power Grymeston openly borrows and clearly rewrites the words of other poets to substantiate her own words of advice to her son, to add the power of patriarchal commands to the frailty of feminine whispers. So familiar is she with her sources, that she is able to integrate the words of others into her thoughts so that it is nearly impossible to know where Grymeston's words end and her sources begin. She prepares her son Bernye and subsequent readers for her particular style when she warns "God send thee too, to be a wits Camelion/That any authors colour can put on" [A3v]. Edmund Spenser, a strong anti-Catholic, but a remarkably moral poet, was one of her most frequent sources. In chapter II, concerning the melancholy of Heraclitus, she writes first her own thoughts:

> Thinke, o thinke, and bethinke thyselfe, from whence thou camest, where thou art, and whither thou goest, for thou art here in an obscure land, goverened by the prince of darknesse, where vice is advanced, vertue scorned, where pleasures are few, paines infinitie...

And then follows her thoughts with snatches of pertinent poetry, such as the following lines by Spenser.

A wretched world, the den of wretchednesse.
Deform'd with filth and foule iniquitie,
A wretched world, the house of hevinesse,
Fild with the wrecks of mortall miserie.
O wretched world, and all that is therein,
The vassals of Gods wrath, and slaves to sinne.[B3]

But in spite of the tie to patriarchal strictures, Grymeston, as Beilin points out, was not too shy to rewrite any poet when it suited her purpose to do so.[4] Grymeston borrows from many sources, from poets with whose work she is familiar and from the Catholic liturgy which is a part of her own prayer life. She so assimilates the patriarchal commands into her mother's love that her writing becomes an intricate web of whispers and commands always urging her son to prayer and meditation.

While Grymeston's purpose is always the edification and salvation of her son, her writing shows she keeps audience, purpose, and style in mind. She is no casual observer of piety, nor is the power of her style accidental. In her preface to her son, she shows an awareness of her work and acknowledges the power of her style. She writes:

> For albeit, if thou provest learned (as my trust is thou wilt; for that without learning man is but as an immortall beast) thou maiest happily thinke that if every Philosopher fetched his sentence, these leaves would be left without lines; yet remember withall, that as it is the best coine that is of greatest valuye in fewest piecesa, so is it not the worst booke that hath most matter in least words.
> The gravest wits, that most grave works expect,
> The qualitie not quantity respect.
> And the spiders webbe is neither the better because woven out of his owne brest, nor the bees hony the worse, for that gathered out of many flowers; neither could I ever brooke to let downe that haltingly in my broken stile, which I found better expressed by a graver author.[A3v]

Early advice books by women, by middles-class mothers

assuming the authority to write moral books for their children because of their impending deaths, leave us with more than just a collection of moral strictures. Through these books we are fortunate to discern, not just the contemporary religious and social ideals on which they built their lives and their beliefs, but the actual voices of women speaking to their children. We are able to come into contact with the mind of women who are well read and careful observers, women who can mix experience with style and leave literary legacies which went through several editions during the 16th and 17th centuries.[5] Though we may find their voices tentative, merely whispers in a sea of patriarchal laws and commands, these books represent our initial contact with the intelligent, middle-class woman sought after by Virginia Woolf.

Notes

[1]Although Joan Kelly refers specifically to the Italian Renaissance, this question is equally valid for the English Renaissance. Not only did the English pattern their Renaissance after the Italian, but they also incorporated the misogynist notions of the Greek patriarchy, using Greek, Roman and Italian literature as well as Biblical writings to support the contention that women should be held to a silent and private social role.

[2]Lynda Boose in her 1991 article, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," underscores the importance of silent women by describing some of the punishments dealt to nags and scolds--especially the use of barbed iron bridles which held the tongue in place and frequently cut it to pieces.

[3]Sir Walter Raleigh wrote an advice book to his son while he was awaiting execution in the tower. Mathew [John] Rogers wrote an advice letter to his children (ca. 1500) shortly before being burned to death before their eyes.

[4]Beilin notes that in at least one instance Grymeston changes a line from Spenser's Fairie Queene in order to emphasize her own point. Because Grymeston's blending is so carefully executed, it is nearly impossible to determine how much of this re-writing occurred.

[5]Grymeston's own ground-breaking book went through four editions, but Dorothy Leigh's book to her children went through an unheard of fifteen editions.

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